

The Modern Mentor: Reimagining The Interconnectedness of Women in Business



Angela Brown & Fiona Gao
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Introduction

The voice of a mentor has since antiquity been recognized as the voice of a woman of experience guiding another worthy soul along a path that their wisdom illuminates. We often forget the term itself comes from Homer's *Odyssey* where the goddess Athena took on the form of Mentor to counsel a path that should be followed in life.

While time and ill use has obscured the basic understanding that the Mentor relationship is about sharing the wisdom of a woman's perspective to enhance another's journeys through life, the WCT Protégé Project has cast its vision into the past to reinvigorate the concept and is working to develop it as a powerful tool for women in the modern world.

Angela Brown and her protegee Fiona Gao are among those women in business forging a new paradigm of the age-old relationship for women through the WCT Protégé Project. Though both women approached the project with the reluctance that thoroughly busy professionals eye any additional time commitment, the experience has been transformational and beneficial in ways that they could not have imagined. Having come to understand the great personal and professional benefits of developing this relationship between women in the modern workforce they feel compelled to share their journey and hopefully lead others to similarly fulfilling experiences.

Through their joint exploration of the innerworkings of a successful mentor-mentee relationship they have arrived at an understanding of foundational aspects of the relationship that enhance the likelihood of success. They invite you the reader to sit down in your mind's eye beside them at the table and listen to their own words as to what it takes to become part of such a rewarding relationship.

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Question 1: What brought you to the WCT Protégé Project?

Angela:



I am at a stage in my career where I am motivated to extend myself beyond my current job to help lift up the next generation. I was approached following a speaking engagement to become an executive sponsor in the WCT Protégé Project. I have been asked to be a mentor before and I wasn't too keen on an open-ended, unstructured engagement. But several things appealed to me about the Protégé Project. First, it was focused on women already in leadership roles and second it was very clearly just a twelve-month commitment. And WCT provides considerable structure, setting the ground-rules for engagement, screening applicants and making the matches. So I was pleased to volunteer.



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Fiona:

I'm a marketing professional with over 14 years of diverse international experience and I had recently relocated to Canada. When I applied to the Protégé Project I was working for a large multinational technology corporation. I felt that an executive sponsor could help me transit into the Canadian technology community and help me build my personal brand and influence. As a newcomer, I was also seeking to expand my network of connections with industry leaders. And I was also at a point where I was seeking strategic guidance in advancing my career in Canada.

I understand it is difficult for some women to decide to engage an executive sponsor. There are no hard and fast rules for deciding if you are ready. The most important thing is to recognize that, whatever your career stage, you have a deficit of knowledge or experience that an executive sponsor can help you fill. You need to be willing to show the strength to ask for that help. Obviously, learning is more accessible than ever on-line and otherwise, but committing to a career sponsorship helps to hold you accountable for filling those gaps in a timely way. It's a big step toward personal and professional growth. And it can have a huge impact on your life.

The application form for the Protégé Project is designed in a way that forces us to articulate clear goals for the engagement. In business, we're taught to develop problem statements before developing solutions so that discipline was certainly reflected in the application process. It helped me to bring the same rigour and reflection to this self-development and growth opportunity as I would to any business opportunity or problem.

Question 2:

**How did you prepare before starting the program?
Were you given any information to get to know each other's backgrounds?**

Angela:

I had a briefing from the project director and a copy of Fiona's resume, and I liked that the WCT process required the candidate to share her goals for the engagement prior to our first meeting.

This provided a business-oriented starting point. I also think that the match that WCT made between Fiona and I was also part of our success; we shared an interest in technology but did not have any direct overlaps that may have limited our ability to share.

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Fiona:

Once I learned that Angela was going to be my sponsor, I did a lot of research on my own to learn as much as I could about her before our first meeting.

Angela is a leader in the fin-tech and payments industry so her on-line profile is quite rich. I wanted to move beyond her Linked In profile and resume to begin to understand who she was as a professional, a female business leader and a person. So I wanted to know as much as possible about her career journey before our first meeting. I also got some guidance from the Protégé Project director to understand the thinking behind our match.

Angela:

Because Fiona had prepared so well for our introductory meeting, I was comfortable from the outset. Before the meeting I may have been wondering if the conversation would fill the 90-minutes we had allocated or whether the kinds of things she was looking for were things I could help with. That first meeting went by quickly, and the topics that Fiona chose to focus on were very business oriented. It helped us establish alignment and plan for our work together right away.

Fiona has brought the same level of preparation to every meeting we've had since. We never run out of things to talk about and our discussions quickly expanded from pure business subjects to the more personal aspects of leadership.



Question 3:

How important is the first meeting?

Are first impressions an important foundation for success in this type of relationship?

Fiona:

That first meeting was really important. It was about getting to know who Angela was and what her challenges and triumphs were. That introduction helped me to design our future meetings and it helped me to avoid irrelevant questions. I felt it was important to move beyond our resumes quickly and establish a foundation of mutual respect and trust.

That initial meeting is key to understanding each others' aspirations and where we are at our respective career junctures. It's where we aligned on what we both hope to get out of the relationship. And where we covered the logistical stuff – scheduling and working style. Also because of the demands I'm making on Angela's time, I wanted to establish a sense of openness and fun as early as possible.

Question 4:

What steps did you take to create a system and environment that allowed for this particular kind of relationship to grow?



Fiona:

Angela made a great recommendation that we hold our meetings in the open space of the Toronto Royal Conservatory café. This helped us to establish that, while it was a business meeting but it was a different kind of business meeting. Without the trappings of any office, we established a safe space for a freer exchange of ideas and aspirations. It was a brilliant idea and allowed us to more quickly establish a peer-to-peer relationship.

Angela:

I really like that spot. It's noisy and relaxed and reminds me of my student days. It helped me to be more comfortable sharing my experiences. We all have stories, experiences we've learned from that aren't always flattering and we're so well trained not to bring them up at the office. So, you can't always tell those stories in a corporate setting. The outside venue made our conversation freer but still purposeful.

Question 5:

What did you hope to gain from the relationship?

Fiona:

My objectives evolved over the time I worked with Angela, but I always had an objective. It was part of the agenda of every meeting. At the outset I was seeking guidance on building profile and a personal brand in the North American business environment. When I had the opportunity to join a start-up and Angela helped me to strategize to weigh the pros and cons between a career in a large corporation and a smaller one. I have a long term aspiration to be a chief marketing officer so we have spent a lot of time building a strategy for that.

Then, more recently, my focus has been on managing my relationships. Our discussions have had more to do with human beings than with business challenges. I believe that our capacity to effectively manage people can be a key differentiator for women in business, particularly in business leadership.



Angela:

Her background was interesting to me and it was clear that she was someone well on her way to senior leadership. I saw that I had experiences that could be relevant to her and, frankly, as a millennial executive with a background in marketing, she had knowledge that I could benefit from as well.

Question 6:

Did your approach to these meetings differ from normal office interactions? Were there strategies that were unique to this setting?

Angela:

I found that once we established a level of trust, the advice I could give Fiona was much more frank than I can give in a corporate context.

We had higher level goals for the mentoring engagement, too. And Fiona always had a specific goal for each meeting. We started out signalling to each other what we wanted to cover in advance. We would exchange articles that we'd read to get the ball rolling. We do less of that now as we've come to know each other. But there is still an objective for every discussion we have.

Fiona:

A sponsorship relationship is for a limited time so a protégé must be mindful from the outset in understanding the value the relationship brings and ensuring that she derives every bit of value possible. This means digging deep into the sponsor's experience to help solve particular business challenges. Angela's constructive advice helped me to surmount a variety of obstacles and take advantage of opportunities within the large corporation I worked for. She helped me see the strategic advantages of a shift into a smaller company. And, once I had joined that company, she helped me to position myself as a team player willing to contribute to a growing enterprise above and beyond my own scope of work. This kind of strategic counsel is invaluable but the protégé must actively seek it out.



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Question 7:

Looking back how do you feel about the experience?


Fiona:

From my perspective the sponsorship Angela provided was fully successful. Over the course of the year she helped me move from a big corporation to a start-up. She helped me strategize and identify a pathway to a CMO position. And she generously shared with me the wealth of the experience she has gained from effectively leading strong teams. She was also generous with her personal network and helped me expand my own in the process.

I also learned things from Angela that will stay with me throughout my career. Her strategic approach to innovation from her position as CEO is to continually ask herself where are the blind spots as she takes her company down a specific pathway to innovation. What's out there that is going to catch us off guard? This way of thinking is now part of my own business philosophy. I use it in my own work and in the business discussions I have with our teams.



"It is important to see this as a mutual relationship. The protégé can also bring value and should actively seek opportunities to do so."



"Fiona is a great resource to me as digital media professional. She has helped to educate me in the way people expect to interact with my company's digital presence."

Angela:

For me this whole experience has been better than I expected it would be. I care deeply about making more space for women in technology and in leadership. I was cautious at the outset but it has exceeded my expectations and now our one-year relationship is into its fifteenth month. Fiona has been a pleasure to work with. I can see by the questions that she raises that she is mentally mapping a career that will take her into a position of senior leadership.

The Inflection Point

You have both spoken about how you see the time we are living in as an “Inflection Point” where traditional norms are giving way to new ways of bringing women in business together in greater collaborative efforts. Can you tell us where you see this path leading?

Angela & Fiona:

The prospects that lay on the horizon for reimagining the old paradigms are truly exciting! This is a seminal moment where visionary women are stepping forward with new ways of looking at how we can cooperate and share our knowledge and experience without being constrained by the old intergenerational and interdisciplinary boundaries.

While our experience through the WCT project is a wonderful example, we feel the climate is ripe for many more successes because we have seen the hunger for such connections voiced in the business community. We feel this will soon lead to a dramatic change for women in business since each success will not stand alone, but will rather create a constellation of interconnectedness that will be a positive guide for women in business for generations to come.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Angela Brown is President and Chief Executive Officer of Moneris. She is responsible for continuing to build Moneris' leadership position in North America, strengthening its position in mobile payments, and expanding its strategic partnerships. Ms. Brown is an experienced executive with more than 25 years in the payments industry.



Fiona Gao is a dynamic marketing and digital growth leader with over 15 years of award-winning global experiences in marketing, digital growth and customer engagement across key international markets. Previously she had led and scaled multiple high-growth portfolios and teams at Google Canada, IMAX, and Maserati in APEC and ME.

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The WCT Protégé Project

WCT (Women in Communications and Technology) with the support of CORUS, created the Protégé Project in 2014. The Protégé Project is the first national, trans-industry, trans-company executive sponsorship program for women in Canada. It maintains an active roster of some of the leading CEOs in business, telecommunications, broadcasting and technology who have committed to provide executive sponsorship opportunities to women.